Interdisciplinary leadership as leading learning

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Outline of presentation

• Project and methodology
• Defining disciplines and leadership
• Leadership as leading learning
• Findings
• Conclusions
The project

Increasing calls for interdisciplinarity
But
• Structural
• Socio-cultural
• Epistemological differences

Some leaders engage - why and how?
Methodology

• Literature review
• Ten in-depth semi-structured interviews of interdisciplinary leaders at KCL and Melbourne
• Appreciative inquiry
  • why engage?
  • what works?
  • principles for effective practice
Framework

Jarzabkowski’s (2005) activity-based strategy as practice method

Practice:
Interdisciplinarity as a situated, socially accomplished flow of organizational activity

Practices:
Administrative, discursive, episodic

Practitioners:
Skilled, knowledgeable actors inside and outside the university
A discipline

“any comparatively self-contained and isolated domain of human experience which possesses its own community of experts”

(Nissani, 1997)

Knowledge, methodology, community
Interdisciplinarity

“a means of solving problems and answering questions that cannot be satisfactorily addressed using single methods or approaches”

(Klein, 1990)

Requires integration
Leadership

Distributed and embedded in context

“much of the work of leading is contingent
... it involves dealing with the specifics of
a time, a place and a set of people”

(Knight & Trowler, 2001)
System level - funding

• Difficulties writing interdisciplinary grants
• Fitting interdisciplinary work into national assessment schemes (RAE in UK)
• Challenges of aligning interdisciplinary work with national funding councils
Institution level - recognition

Issues with traditional discipline-based reward systems:

- mode of publication: e.g. government report rather than journal article or book
- location of publication: generalist rather than specialist journal
- time frame: interdisciplinary work takes time to develop
- publication in peer-reviewed journals using unfamiliar literatures

A risky business best left till later?
Faculty, school, department level

• Tribal academic disciplines
• Administrative issues:
  • finance
  • course registration
  • time-tabling
  • computer systems

“IT is quite difficult to teach interdisciplinary courses ... with different timetables, for instance, or different habits, different expectations, different cultures, perhaps of contact, or different entry level requirements.”
Leadership as leading learning

“Learning takes place within communities of practice and activity systems that have their own sub-cultures and discursive repertoires”

Knight and Trowler (2001) on leadership at departmental level
Learning

• Tacit (Polanyi, 1966)
• Social (Bandura, 1977)
• Situated (Lave & Wenger, 1991)

a “dialectical model of learning in which individual and context interact in critical ways…and…are mutually constitutive”

(Lattuca, 2002)
Identity and power

The community “provides the language in which individuals understand themselves and interpret their world”

(Henkel, 2000)

Self identity “a reflexively organised endeavour … which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives”

(Giddens, 1991)
Habitus

“a system of shared dispositions and cognitive structures which generates perceptions, appreciations and actions”

(Bourdieu, 1988)
Foucault and power

Discipline is “a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a physics' or an 'anatomy' of power, a technology"

(Foucault, 1977)

"Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free"

(Foucault, 1982)
Adair (1984) on leadership

- Task
- Individual
- Team
Leading interdisciplinary learning
Broader purposes

“How do you make democracy work in an age of science-mediated risk … it’s actually sitting at the biggest questions we face … how we manage expert knowledge in a democracy”

“the practical application and the notion that my ideas are likely to be taken up quickly … is one of the things that appeals to me”
Intellectual possibilities

“other ways of understanding the world, which are powerful and which can help”

“demanding and more ambitious … – it’s a leadership challenge – a way of bringing a variety of perspectives together in a coherent organised fashion”

a “mental framework on which you can hang things … more things in far fewer tasks, with a simpler context”

“tremendously stimulating for yourself as a teacher or a writer, to be writing for a discipline other than your own”
Establishing relationships

“you talk to people and you engage with their arguments”

“respect other people who also bother to go into primary resources, primary materials, who can argue with contrary points of view without being immediately judgemental. ... play the argument; don’t play the person”

“unconditional respect for the disciplines that the person represents ... a real interest in their work, their proposal, what motivates them and the kinds of concerns that they express in regard to a collaboration”
Building a team

Collegial - crossing functional boundaries

“it’s about empowering them, to get those things running, and then … knitting those back together again”

they “worked in that area for intellectual rewards, academic rewards, so it needs a more democratic approach”

“I don’t necessarily lead them. I see myself as support staff. … I try to be as interactive as I can. I comment on the drafts. I go to meetings. I talk about issues”

You can all bring your expertise in, but at least you need to be running in the same direction … a matter of the co-ordination of people’s understandings”
Motivating others

Issues to deal with:

• Individual researchers absorbed by their own individual projects.
• Career preparation of faculty within a discipline
• Research and professional bodies with their embedded interests
• Interdisciplinarity not itself a driving force.
  • Is there a career interdisciplinarian?
  • Interest in the subject should be the driver
Techniques for interaction

“listen to different points of view, suggest syntheses and compromises, crisscross contributions and gain help from participants … to interact in ways that are not dysfunctional and disruptive…”

“…intellectual agility … commitment to the problem … a willingness to build flexibility into the process .. and to respect that people come to the interdisciplinary table because they are experts in a field”

“the willingness to compromise with other people … to accept uncertainty … to accept that you’re not going to be able to see the world in the same way”
Disciplinary differences?

“People from science will want to move towards the output thing, let’s get on with it, humanities people be willing more to engage in those conversations… and I see some impatience sometimes with the scientists”
Intellectual environment

• Ensuring that each participating department has a representative
• Balancing the views of small and large groups
• Making space to review terminology - “precise language” not “jargon”
• Using a vocabulary that embraces a wide audience
• Valuing alternative disciplinary views in articles
Physical environment

“... if you want research, the structure has to be flexible and informal ... if we can sort out where to put the coffee rooms and the toilets, the rest will follow”

“a very impressive group ... but we all disappear again, and nobody talks to one another ... we’ve got so much knowledge here, but the co-ordination and managing of it, never mind the social or personal side, is quite dispersed”
Organisational environment

Importance of early training in enabling transfer potential

How safe to take a risk?
  • Research assessment disincentive
  • Institutional recognition
Leading interdisciplinary learning

Identity – Influenced by discipline
Career stage
Recognition and reward

Disciplines
Epistemological
Cultural
Linguistic
Political aspects

Learning
Purposes
Possibilities
Motivation
Environment
Engagement

Learning

Identity

Individual
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References

References


